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# The Witness of Dorothy Day and the Future of Liberation Theology

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**Abstract:** A study around the concepts of “witness” and “testimony,” in the fields of Philosophy and Theology, as exemplified by the life work of Dorothy Day. The impact of her work in the U.S., from early to mid-twentieth century, and with the Catholic Worker Movement, is compared to that of the Latin American movement of Liberation Theology. Examples are provided of Dorothy Day’s observations on the agricultural workers strike and César Chávez, as well as various socio-political movements in Latin American countries. Also detailed and compared, are the early and later efforts under Liberation Theology, for its Church influences and dictates, as well as its popular impact and significance.

**Keywords:** Liberation Theology, Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker Movement 1930s, Testimony/*Testimonio*, Mysticism

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A witness, in legal terms, is a person who has seen or heard important facts or words and can provide information and details about them. And an experience related by someone, in which he or she took part and lived, is recorded in his or her memory. Testimony, thus, is the declaration of that person who saw, heard, experienced, and memorized what happened; a declaration that is collected in court, or on records, to ensure its validity. It is therefore a subjective experience that is opened to public access in order to establish justice or restore the order that was broken, or perhaps to point the right way to those who have been affected or may benefit from the narrative. Our purpose in this essay is, after considering the meaning of the concepts of “witness” and “testimony,” to “listen” to the witness of Dorothy Day.<sup>1</sup> We want to examine aspects of her life and spiritual experience in order to evaluate how her legacy extends beyond her person, and how it can benefit people in far-reaching communities and continents. Her testimony reinforces a new way of living for a contemporary Western society in times of crisis.

It is also our purpose to reflect on Dorothy Day’s testimony in contrast/comparison with Liberation Theology, which has flourished in Latin America since the 1970s. We think that Dorothy Day was to a great extent an unconscious pioneer for what the Church in the southern hemisphere of America created as a new way of doing theology. This article will attempt to show how at this moment, early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Liberation Theology builds a new future, the witness of Dorothy Day is an important source of inspiration. And with these thoughts, we hope to have contributed to greater dialogue between North and South America.

## SOME PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON TESTIMONY

A *witness*—in the theological sense—is someone “torn” in flesh and spirit between the abyss of the truth he or she attests and certifies, and the world that does not want to receive his/her message.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the witness is always seen as bothering, embarrassing, and disturbing, since he or she brings to the fore something radical and excessive. Truth is connected to the witness’ spiritual biography, exposing itself to the boldness of inventing a new language, in order to tell a truth for which humanity has inextinguishable thirst. The witness professes “*per se*” more than him or herself. He/she bears a truth that cannot be reduced to mere opinion. Moreover, this makes his/her testimony normative, connecting the fate of truth to his/her own destiny. The witness, therefore, bears and carries out something precious and urgent.

The etymology of the word “witness” is revealing: The Greek word *marturia*, “testimony,” is the act or result of witnessing, attesting, or deposing a conviction that is heavy and imposes itself with urgency. Said urgency is necessary, always present in memory and heart, and imparts anxiety and distress.<sup>3</sup>

It was this urgency and call, felt by Dorothy Day, which led her to radically change her life options and made herself a witness. Her life and actions contain all the elements cited above: She gave up future plans, the man she loved, and professional opportunities she could

have pursued. By doing so, she bore witness to her absolute love of God, revealed to her in the face of the poor. Her witness on the human condition would then inspire many others.

### DOROTHY DAY'S LOVE FOR THE POOR

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) was acutely aware of, and deeply touched by, the economic and social injustice around her. As a young girl, she saw the world through eyes wide-open, first during the San Francisco earthquake, and later, upon observing the lives of people in the neighborhoods of South Chicago, in injustice and poverty. She developed a premonition of her own vocation, understanding it as being inseparable from life: "From that time on, my life was to be linked to theirs, their interests would be mine: I had received a call, a vocation, and a direction in life."<sup>4</sup>

Dorothy Day's social sensibility reveals a sense of conscientiousness ahead of her time. For her, it was not enough to aid victims of social injustice, it was necessary to attack and destroy the causes of social disorder as well. Her sensibility was touched, sharpened, and developed through an evangelical approach to her work: "Where," she wondered, "were the saints who try to change the social order, not just to minister to slaves but to do away with slavery?"<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Church had begun to think about injustice and the need for changes in social structures in 1891, with Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Those changes would not be developed until the 1960s by the Vatican II Council. They were then reshaped by the Latin American Church in Medellín and Puebla. Fundamentally the Church recognizes its need to turn to the world and deal with social and cultural structures. This was the fundamental content of Vatican II document "Gaudium Et Spes". Then Latin American Church interpreted those orientations according to Latin American context, crossed by poverty and injustice. These ideas were always present for Dorothy Day, not only a pioneer, but to some extent also a prophet: It was not enough to fight poverty's effects, society had to be transformed at the roots.

She was way ahead of the most progressive reflections of contemporary Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Her praxis, present throughout her writings, reveals ongoing prayer and systematic thought, demonstrating that she actually anticipated movements that would only emerge much later in the Church. The need for political and structural

solutions—rather than palliative and fragmented ones—would emerge in Liberation Theology, which inspired the Latin American Catholic Church during the 1970s. Dorothy Day's "Catholic Worker" concept (created with Peter Maurin) was not simply a civic or political stance, but a spiritual attitude, and the fruit of a radical reading of the Gospels. As she states: "What right have any of us to security when God's poor are suffering? What right have I to sleep in a comfortable bed when so many are sleeping in the shadows of buildings here in this neighbourhood of the Catholic Worker office? What right have we to food when so many are hungry, or to liberty when ... so many labour organizers are in jail?"<sup>7</sup>

For Dorothy Day, it was not enough to preach against poverty from someplace else; she believed it necessary to experience poverty from within, because it was the only way to develop truer solidarity with the poor, embracing their same fate. This type of solidarity was essential for Christian commitment: "We need always to be thinking and writing about poverty, for if we are not among its victims, its reality fades from us. We must talk about poverty, because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it ... Maybe no one can be told, maybe they will have to experience it."<sup>8</sup>

### THE CATHOLIC WORKER MOVEMENT: THE FRUIT OF DOROTHY DAY'S WITNESS

For some researchers, the Catholic Worker Movement is considered something that embodies an implicit theology of liberation in a North American context.<sup>9</sup> A movement of more than eighty years of existence, it advocates voluntary poverty, nonviolence, daily works of mercy, and seeking authentic liberation from personal and social sin: a conversion of hearts and transformation of structures.<sup>10</sup>

As co-founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin's goals were to "create a society in which it will be easier to be good."<sup>11</sup> To that end, the newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, held an important role—to reach those most affected by dehumanization and injustice.<sup>12</sup> In the 1930s, when the Catholic Worker Movement began, the most pressing concerns were massive unemployment and terrible poverty caused by the Great Depression. Even after the challenges changed and the U.S. was no longer living the Great Depression, but dealing with the participation in the Second World War, followed by the Cold War, Vietnam War, etc. The movement continued, in faithful witness of, and in solidarity

with, society's marginalized working poor: through strikes, labour struggles, war protests, and unjustified incarcerations. For Dorothy Day, these actions were equivalent to the witness and testimony of the Gospels.<sup>13</sup> The Catholic Worker Movement aspired to live radical Christian commitment<sup>14</sup> in order to create a new society "within the shell of the old."<sup>15</sup> Among the movement's critiques: unjust distribution of wealth; political organization of the government; distorted images of the human person caused by class, race, and sexual gender restrictions; and the arms race.<sup>16</sup> The movement advocated for human beings, a decentralized society, acts of nonviolence, works of mercy, and voluntary poverty.<sup>17</sup>

The poor are the centre of the Catholic Worker Movement, as it was for its founder, Dorothy Day: "While our brothers suffer, we must be compassionate with them, suffer with them. While our brothers suffer from lack of necessities, we will refuse to enjoy comforts."<sup>18</sup> Concrete daily encounters with the poor became the "harsh and dreadful love" about which she frequently spoke.<sup>19</sup> She wrote about "the bitterness of the poor, who cheat each other, who exploit each other even as they are exploited, who despise each other even as they are the despised. And is it to be expected that virtue and destitution should go together? No ... they are the destitute in every way, destitute of this world. They need so much that we cannot take the works of mercy apart and say I will do this one or that one work of mercy. We find they all go together."<sup>20</sup>

Her conception about service to the poor anticipates Liberation Theology, which conceived the God of Judaeo-Christian revelation as a "partial" God, one who "prefers" the poor.<sup>21</sup> Like a loving father, God draws close to those in greatest need: the poor, orphans, the widow, the foreigner.<sup>22</sup> He supports those who have no one to speak for them. That is what her movement wanted to emulate. It is in that daily encounter that the Catholic Worker Movement was born, in small and concrete gestures like writing a newspaper and distributing it for "a penny a copy," as Dorothy Day and the first members of the Catholic Worker Movement used to sell the newspaper in the streets. Those actions would have an impact. Decades later, they were visible again in the Latin American Church through Liberation Theology. Before those theologians, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin combined a philosophy of behavior with concrete action, inspired by a theology of incarnated love.<sup>23</sup> The commonalities between Dorothy Day's legacy and the theological reflections of the Latin American Church after Vatican II are remarkable.

## LIBERATION THEOLOGY: A DIFFERENT WAY OF INTERPRETING THE GOSPEL

In 1968, three years after Vatican II, Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia stated they wanted to no longer be a Church that "reflected" orientations and priorities issued from afar, but a Church that was a *source* of new thought emerging from a Latin American context.<sup>24</sup> The Medellín bishops issued three major points: (1) to connect the preaching of the Gospel with the practice of justice; (2) to consider the mysteries of Revelation from the perspective of the poor; (3) and to inaugurate a new way of being a Church, by gathering lay people from the poorest parts of the continent to interpret the Bible in a transformative way.<sup>25</sup> In 1979, the Latin American Conference of Bishops (CELAM) in Puebla, Mexico, rescued those three points, officially instituting a system of grassroots groups called Basic Ecclesial Communities, ministering to the poor preferentially. This new theology dubbed "Liberation Theology."<sup>26</sup> In 2007, the Fifth Conference of Latin American bishops, in Aparecida, Brazil, brought attention to ministering to the poor. In the opening speech, Pope Benedict XVI reconfirmed this option as an evangelical one, no longer to be discussed in terms of validity, for it is implicitly already contained in Christological faith in God, who became poor for us to enrich us with his poverty.<sup>27</sup>

The poor being the centre of Christian life, in Gustavo Gutiérrez's definition of Liberation Theology, "a critical reflection on praxis,"<sup>28</sup> he affirms, nevertheless, that the option for the poor neither starts from nor departs from a simple critical analysis of reality, but instead from a mystical experience: a deep encounter with the Lord in the face of the poor.<sup>29</sup> From here, a system and discourse are developed: to see, judge, and act.<sup>30</sup> In an oppressed context, there can be no theology without social analysis (to see), which must then be tied to the Scripture (to judge). The transformative stage (to act) will then emerge, inspire, and guide the commitment and political positions of Christians.<sup>31</sup> This theology was not meant to remain on books and in academic courses, but instead to relate back to the poor, and help put into action their liberation process. Liberation Theology sought to build a new society by struggling alongside the poor to make them the subjects of their own history.<sup>32</sup>

For twenty centuries of Church history, the poor have occupied the centre of attention for Christian social teaching. For the Church Fathers, the poor, the saints, and

the mystics were subjects of a privileged form of love.<sup>33</sup> In 1968, after the Second Vatican Council, the Church moved to greater secularisation; Pope John XXIII defined the Church as the Church of the Poor.<sup>34</sup>

### THE OPTION FOR THE POOR: THE HEART OF A REFORMED THEOLOGY

The preferential option for the poor is not a recent invention, but one of the basic principles of the Catholic Social Teaching tradition.<sup>35</sup> It is present in the Church's Canon, which states that "The Christian faithful are obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor from their own resources."<sup>36</sup> What Vatican II did was to call the faithful back to the origins of their faith, to live it fully in commitment for justice and charity. The phrase "option for the poor" was first used in 1968 by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, in a letter to the Jesuits of Latin America.<sup>37</sup> The option was further developed as a theological principle by the Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his landmark book, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (1971).<sup>38</sup>

In fact, Liberation Theology was never a purely academic, but an ecclesial practice, meant to help the Church develop a clearer goal to serve the poor.<sup>39</sup> Liberation theologians were simply trying to return to the source, the core of the Gospel: blessed are the poor.<sup>40</sup> Conversion implies and includes not only helping the poor with charitable handouts, but also to live like them, to experience—even to a limited extent—what they endure, to participate in and "empathise" with their suffering and condition. Then, from within, to help the poor become artisans of their own history and destiny. As Gustavo Gutiérrez states:

When it is lived in authentic imitation of Christ, the witness of poverty does not alienate us from the world at all ... Only through concrete acts of love and solidarity can we effectively realise our encounter with the poor and the exploited, through them, with Jesus Christ. To give to them is to say yes to Christ.<sup>41</sup>

Many questions arose from that change by the Latin American Church, its methodology to be closer to the poor. Groups were formed which tried different models

of "following" Christ, by following the poor. But other groups, including middle-class Catholics, rejected the idea of becoming poor as the only way to live their faith, and complained that they were being neglected by their Church. That was when Clodovis Boff, one of the more prominent liberation theologians, came up with a typology that helped broach an understanding of what it meant to share the life of the poor, making that option for the poor preferential (but not exclusive), while respecting one's state of life, work, and familiar commitments. Boff stated that every Christian must commit to the option for the poor, because this is the only way to truly follow Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> Early fathers of the Church such as Irenaeus,<sup>43</sup> Chrysostomus,<sup>44</sup> Ambrose<sup>45</sup> and others, repeat this idea in different, also radical, manners. Life circumstances can be, and often are, diverse. But this mandate for all Christians also has diverse nuances when put into practice: One can opt for the poor with a *conversion of interests*. A person can, on the one hand, hold a respectable position among peers and the public, but on the other, redirect skills, capabilities, and fruits toward the needs of the poor, to help and empower them, thus ensuring social impact, and making structures more just, and society more fair.

One can also opt for the poor by *alternating* one's social standing with theirs. That is the case of many Christians, both religious and lay people, who work for a living during the week, but on the weekend help in a poor neighbourhood. Those who teach at a university can spend holidays living among the poor, giving classes, building houses, providing free medical consultations or dentistry. To some extent, they share in the living conditions of those who are poor, if only for a certain number of hours, days, or weeks.

A third way of living the option for the poor is through *incarnation*: This means to cut ties with a previous life, including comfort, privacy, time, and money, and go out to share entirely in the life of the poor. There have been many people—lay, monks or clergy—who have done this and continue to do so still.<sup>46</sup> This was Dorothy Day's choice. As Gustavo Gutiérrez writes with strength and prophetic fire:

Love of neighbour is an essential component of Christian life. But as long as I apply that term only to the people who cross my path and come asking me for help, my world will remain



pretty much the same. Individual almsgiving and social reformism is a type of love that never leaves its own front porch ... But the existence of the poor ... is not neutral on the political level or innocent of ethical implications. Poor people are byproducts of the system under which we live and for which we are responsible ... That is why the poverty of the poor is not a summons to alleviate their plight with acts of generosity, but rather a compelling obligation to fashion an entirely different social order.<sup>47</sup>

It is this different social order that many Latin American Christians sought to build. It is also the one that Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin emulated with the Catholic Worker Movement: to build a new world in the cradle of the old one.

#### DOROTHY DAY AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The following is a comparison of aspects shared by both the Liberation Theology movement and Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement, in each case centered on the option for the poor.

First, and the most important commonality, is placing the poor at the centre of Christian commitment. Neither movement separates faith and life, faith and praxis, spirituality and action.

Next is the radical form that this option for the poor must take. It is not simply giving alms, or providing goods to the needy (old clothes, old food, old objects, dirty and dusty things). Both Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement and Liberation Theology had clearly in mind and heart that life should be transformed by the encounter with the poor. While Dorothy Day directed her life and actions according to the needs of the poor, building houses of hospitality to shelter them, bringing and providing food for the hungry, assuming the deprivations of one's own life in consequence, Liberation theologians formulated their reflections around the need for structural transformation, and not just momentary assistance to someone's needs. For Day's Catholic Worker Movement, as well as for Liberation Theology, the practice is not and cannot be individualistic, but instead, it

should be centered on the building of community. The Gospel cannot let things remain as they are—they require transformation. The medium for that transformation is the community, faithful to the doctrine of the apostles (*didakè*), in fraternal solidarity (*koinonia*), the sharing of bread with gratitude (*eucharistia*), and through prayers in common (*proseuchai*).<sup>48</sup>

The importance of a ministry to the poor is revealed in both movements, principally that it is impossible to opt for the poor from a distance. It is modeled by God Himself in his kenotic descent, becoming human flesh. The option for the poor is incarnated spirituality and supposes an exodus from one's own habits, comforts, possessions, and time. For Dorothy Day, this was very clear, and she left in legacy her Catholic Worker Movement. For Liberation Theology, as elaborated by Clodovis Boff, three possible levels are evidenced in the option for the poor. Even if one does not reach the third stage, Incarnation, the first, Conversion of Interests, is mandatory.

By putting service to the poor at the centre of their lives and action, neither Day's movement nor Liberation Theology made purely sociological or political choices. It is a theological choice, backed by the entire history of the Church. They affirmed that it is necessary to opt preferentially for the poor because God did so. God revealed Himself as the God of the poor, who comes down having heard the cries of people in distress; speaks for the poor, widows, orphans, and foreigners; the one who leaves His/Her divine privileges to assume our vulnerable and mortal flesh, obedient until death on the Cross. Motivations in opting for the poor are not to create a political party or political structures, but to do God's will and build His/Her Kingdom. The results are changes of structures and transformation of reality.

Divergences between the two movements include the conception of revolution they had as orientation. While Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement stressed the importance of conversion of the heart as the central point of their revolution,<sup>49</sup> Liberation Theology believes it is imperative to make a structural revolution, attacking the roots of injustice and oppression, to change the social and political order. It is not that Dorothy Day's movement did not give importance to social and political transformations—it certainly did. But the priority was to change the person.<sup>50</sup> Then, the changed person would change society. Liberation Theology's goal was to transform society deeply and radically through its configurations. That is

why some proponents of Liberation Theology identified themselves with some political systems.<sup>51</sup> Liberation Theology was criticized for that and certainly that was at the root of the difficulties it had with the Vatican.<sup>52</sup>

While both movements were a critical irruption within the Church, the critiques took different shapes. Dorothy Day was principally concerned with being faithful and obedient to the institutional Church, having many times withdrawn her positions publicly in order to follow the mandates of bishops and superiors. Liberation Theology had many direct and public confrontations with the Catholic Church at institutional and official levels;<sup>53</sup> many theologians were punished and left the priesthood, even their profession as theologians. Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, on the contrary, were always very keen on remaining Catholic and did not want to enter in conflict with the Institutional Church. Liberation Theology had a difficult time with Church hierarchy because of the use of Marxist-oriented analysis. Liberation theologians argued that they used these strategies in the same way that Thomas Aquinas, during the Middle Ages, used the pagan philosophy of Aristotle. Nevertheless, this critical point has never been well resolved.<sup>54</sup>

Liberation Theology intended to build a new way of doing theology. It was really an academic proposal, although meant to happen within the Church and to be put to the service of the poor. The more prominent theologians who studied abroad for years, rethinking theological topics from the perspective of poor, obtained degrees and wrote books and articles. Many are translated into English.<sup>55</sup> Plans for fifty volumes were halted at twenty due to Rome's intervention. Dorothy Day, in contrast, never intended to elaborate a theological system. That does not mean that there was not a deep theology behind the praxis of her movement. Now, many books and articles have been written about Dorothy Day's thought and the Catholic Worker Movement. Her priority, however, was to think systematically and rigorously about her movement's praxis. The priority was praxis and not theory.

After reflecting on these common and diverging points, we can find that neither movement is dead. Despite the frequent suggestion that Liberation Theology has disappeared, this is not true. Liberation theologians continue to think, write, and form new generations of theologians who want to commit their lives to doing theology for the sake of justice. Now, what is the future of liberation theology, fifty years after Vatican II Council

which initiated its impulse? A reexamination of Dorothy Day's work demonstrates connections and continuation of both orientations.

## DOES LIBERATION THEOLOGY HAVE A FUTURE?

Liberation Theology spread widely during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1989, however, due to world crisis, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and of Eastern European state socialism, many lay people who were deeply committed to social and political struggle due to their Christian faith, fell silent. Many theologians, considered communist and atheistic because of their ideas, came under suspicion, and were even punished by the Vatican.

Outside the Church, it looked like the socialist utopia had been defeated, and the only possible model of society was the capitalist one. Without the balance of power provided by the socialist bloc (the second world), there was no means for thinking about a way of living other than through the market economy and consumerist society. A great sense of disillusionment overcame the hearts and minds of many who had been supportive of the proposals of Liberation Theology, who had learned to read and interpret the Gospel through the Liberation Theology model.

Now, with historical distance, we can more fully evaluate that crisis as a positive one. It forced Liberation theologians to expand their horizons and realise that the process of liberation was not only about human beings, but also the whole of creation. Ecological concerns and the struggle to protect the Earth came to be seen as indivisible from human concerns. Environmental sustainability and care for the Earth came onto the liberation agenda, alongside other issues such as gender, race, etc. New forms of reflection began with the conviction that to build justice also implied building a sustainable world. Everything that harmed human beings was harmful to the planet as well. If the human race continued to destroy nature and life in all its manifestations, very soon human beings would not be able to survive. The inseparable link between the struggle for justice, and the struggle for nature and biodiversity, became central to committed theological reflection.<sup>56</sup>

Christian theology, even in its more open and up-to-date forms such as Liberation Theology, has been accused of having too anthropocentric an approach to the world and human life in it. The traditional interpretation of the Genesis mandate to "grow and dominate the earth"<sup>57</sup> was

considered responsible for humankind's greedy attitude toward nature and creation. To reverse this idea, theology had to evolve. Christian consciousness grew increasingly aware that to respect and revere the Earth in all the forms in which it presented itself to the five human senses, was the *sine qua non* for achieving true liberation according to the tenets of the Bible and the Gospel of Christ.<sup>58</sup> The big question of the poor is always there because, unfortunately, poverty is far from being overcome, but Liberation Theology recognizes there are other poverties—anthropological poverties—afflicting human beings.<sup>59</sup>

An important book by Gustavo Gutiérrez: "*Mirar lejos*": *Dorothy Day's Witness*,<sup>60</sup> calls attention to bring those powerful issues to the forefront, instilling Liberation Theology to become richer, deeper, and more theological.

**The issue of non-violence.** Dorothy Day was a faithful, constant, and respectful peace builder. These days, where almost all Latin American countries are experiencing the sad spectacle of their youth killed by violence as a bitter fruit of drugs, narcotraffic, gangs, cartels, etc., and the frequent response of governing systems with more violence, the stubborn faithfulness of Dorothy Day to the Gospel of Jesus and the Sermon of the Mount merits important reflection. The best position—one that is truly radical and without compromise—is forgiveness and reconciliation.

**The centrality of spirituality.** Dorothy Day was a doer, a woman of action, but she was also contemplative. Because of that, her action was so blessed, so coherent and fruitful. When the temptation is to search for purely "secular" solutions, the witness of Dorothy Day reminds us that the only source of true liberation is God, and anything that is done has to find its roots in Him and nowhere else.

**Creative faithfulness to the Church.** Dorothy Day was a free woman. But she was a fervent and faithful Catholic also. The last thing she wanted was to quarrel with the Church and to be apart from it. Because of that, she lived difficult moments when her conscience was confronted by the hierarchy.<sup>61</sup> But she remained resolute, faithful, humble, and free.<sup>62</sup> And today, the Church is evaluating her canonization.

## CONCLUSION: BUILDING BRIDGES AND BEING RADICAL

Dorothy Day had a special love for struggles throughout the continent, and contacts with Latin American

leaders and activists who were important in her life. In the U.S., an important contact was with the peasant leader César Chávez, Mexican-American apostle of non-violence and founder of the National Farm Workers Association; a man who believed in nonviolent reaction as a means toward justice, and was accompanied by Dorothy in many struggles.<sup>63</sup> Early in her Catholic conversion, in 1962, she had contacts with and interviewed the head of the Nicaraguan rebels, Augusto César Sandino. She stated:

The work we were engaged in was to publicize and raise funds for General Sandino, who was resisting American aggression in Nicaragua. Our marines were hunting him in the mountains and the work of our committee was to raise funds and medical supplies. I did the publicity. I was so new a Catholic that I was still working for this committee for some months after my baptism, and I talked to Fr. Zachary about the work: "I am in agreement with it," I told him. "We should not be sending our marines to Nicaragua. I am in agreement with many of the social aims of Communism. From each according to his ability and to each according to his need."<sup>64</sup>

The Fr. Zachary she met explained to her about atheism, which is at the base of Marxism, and gave her a book on the life of St. Therese of Lisieux to read.

Dorothy Day also wrote a preface to a book on Camilo Torres, the Colombian priest who joined the guerrillas and died after being shot by a Colombian military patrol. It is a wonderful piece, well written and full of delicate and refined sensibility. In it, she appears to agree with Camilo Torres' ideals and struggles, but disagrees with the violent way he chose to pursue what he believed. That is why, in the second part of the preface, she confronts Camilo Torres with another apostle, a Protestant, Martin Luther King Jr. She describes how he had similar dreams and ideals as Camilo Torres, but chose the way of non-violence and died without killing. In the end, she says: "Martin Luther King Jr., we ask your prayers that we [may] learn more to overcome ourselves, and to learn the violence we need to impose upon ourselves in



overcoming righteous wrath against the oppressor and so grow in non-violence.”<sup>65</sup> She continues: “Father Camilo Torres, pray for us, that we may have your courage in offering our lives for our brothers. And may God’s light shine upon you both, and may you rest in peace.”<sup>66</sup>

A rich and impressive piece of her testimony on/to Latin American leaders is a brief, handwritten note to Fidel Castro, shortly after victory of the Cuban Revolution. It is the draft for a telegram sent October 2, 1962:

To Prime Minister Fidel Castro:

Fidel compañero,

I have visited your country, broken bread with the people, visited the *granjas* with pescadores, with travellers, [and with] citizens and soldiers on the *autobús* to San Diego de Cuba, with students and teachers and soldiers at the school in the city of Camilo Cienfuegos, that beautiful gift of the army to the children of the Sierra Maestra. I love Cuba and the work of the Revolution. Before I leave next Monday, October 1<sup>st</sup> for Mexico and the U.S., I beg a tremendous favour. As a Catholic, I beg to visit the imprisoned priests to report on their welfare. Can they offer Mass? Are they being taught to work with their hands? Are they living in solitary or with others?

As a Catholic utopian socialist, I greet the Revolution. As a Catholic communicant, may I greet the imprisoned priests whose office I must respect; though I disagree with their politics? Permit me this work of mercy, I beg you. I pray for you and the Revolution daily.

With profound respect,  
Compañera Dorothy Day.<sup>67</sup>

We do not know if Fidel answered her note.

The witness of Dorothy Day can be of great impact

not only to Liberation Theology, but also for every Christian who, today, wishes to live his or her faith in connection to concrete life problems and open to intercultural and interfaith dialogue. As a witness who remained faithful to the truth she made commitment to transmit, she can teach the difficult art of being faithful to our identity, while open to the differences of the other; to be radically coherent in what we believe is for sake of the Kingdom and glory of God, but also respectful of other ways of feeling and thinking; and last, but not least, to never to get distant from what is in the heart, because it is the heart of God Himself: the privilege of the poor.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anarchist, journalist, social activist, and devout Catholic convert, Dorothy Day advocated for distributism and believed all states were inherently totalitarian. Born in Brooklyn Heights, she grew up in San Francisco and Chicago, her father a sports writer who lost his job after the San Francisco earthquake and helped homeless victims afterward, which remained ingrained in his daughter’s memory. She joined the anti-war protest by the Wobblies, rejoiced in the Bolshevik Revolution, and began working as a journalist in Greenwich Village. A spiritual awakening after bohemian life led her to embrace Catholicism, and during the 1930s, she founded the Catholic Worker Movement (with Peter Maurin, a French immigrant and self-described vagabond, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi), a nonviolent, pacifist organization that continues today.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Adamov, Spring 1940, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Le livre de la pauvreté et de la mort*, trad. Adamov, Actes Sud, 1982, p. 7, quoted in epigraph of the book *Le passage de témoin*, by Jean Philippe Pierron (Aris: Cerf, La Nuit surveillée, 2006), p. 9.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Jean Philippe Pierron, op. cit., p. 21, quoting Ramon Pannikar, *Temoignage et dialogue*, in Eric Castelli (sous la dir. de) *Le Temoignage, actes du colloque organisé par le Centre international d’études humanistes et par l’Institut d’études philosophiques de Rome*, Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1972, p. 373.
- <sup>4</sup> Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, NY: Image Books, 1959, op. cit., p. 37.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 87.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, a bright thinker and fervent believer

- such as Jacques Maritain, who did not believe in radical insertion among the poor, in order to fight poverty, was a call every Christian needed to heed.
- 7 Robert Ellsberg, *Selected Writings*, op. cit., pp. 69-70.
- 8 Ibid p. 106.
- 9 See Joe McKenzie-Hami, *To Afflict the Comfortable and Comfort the Afflicted*, NY: Fordham University, M.A. thesis, May 31, 1986, p. 60.
- 10 Ibid p. 61.
- 11 Thomas C. Cornell, Robert Ellsberg and Jim Forest, eds, *A Penny a Copy: Readings from the Catholic Worker*, NY: Orbis, 1995, p. xiii.
- 12 See Catholic Worker May 1933: "For those who are sitting on park benches in the warm spring sunlight. For those who are trying to escape the rain ...," and so on, < <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytext.cfm?TextID=913>>.
- 13 Cf. R. Ellsberg, *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings*, NY, Orbis, 1992, p. xvi.
- 14 Cf. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*, op. cit., p. 37. According to P. Maurin, to be radical is to go to the roots of a problem, enlightening it with Christian revelation and tradition.
- 15 Peter Maurin, *Easy Essays*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald (1984), p. 109.
- 16 Dorothy Day's position, and that of her movement, can be classified as Christian anarchist. Born and configured in political philosophy and political theology, it is the belief that there is only one source of authority to which Christians are ultimately answerable, the authority of God as embodied in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Pacifism is one of the characteristics of this movement; so is rejection of war of any kind. Leo Tolstoy—whom she read since her youth—was an influence. Christian anarchists denounce the state as violent, deceitful and, when glorified, a form of idolatry.
- 17 Cf. Joe MacKenzie-Hami, op. cit., p. 64.
- 18 Cf. in Stanley Vishnewski, NY: Paulist Press (1970), p. 52.
- 19 "Love in Action is a Harsh and Dreadful Thing Compared to Love in Dreams," is a sentence written by Dostoyevsky in the *Brothers Karamazov*, through the mouth of character Staretz Zosima, a phrase frequently cited by Dorothy Day. See: J. Forest, "A Harsh and Dreadful Love: Dorothy Day's Witness to the Gospel," in <<http://www.jimandnancyforest.com/2005/01/09/a-harsh-and-dreadful-love/>> accessed on 03/12/2012. See also the book of W. Miller, *A Harsh and Dreadful Love*, Milwaukee: Marquette, 2005.
- 20 Cf. Robert Ellsberg, op. cit., p. 100.
- 21 See Ronaldo Muñoz, *O Deus dos cristãos*, Petropolis: Vozes, 1985.
- 22 Cf. Isaiah 1:17-23; Jeremiah 7:3 and 49:11; Ezekiel 22:7, 25; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5.
- 23 Cf. Joe Mackenzie-Hamo, p. 80.
- 24 See the reflection of the great Brazilian philosopher Henrique de Lima Vaz, Igreja-reflexo vs. Igreja-fonte. *Cadernos Brasileiros*, nº 46, mar/abr, 1968, p. 17-22.
- 25 See document of conclusions of Medellín, 1968. See also the comments and reflections after Medellín, for instance Agenor Brighenti, A opção pelos pobres e a urgencia da missão, in <<http://www.revistamissoes.org.br>> accessed on 02/10/2012.
- 26 See Clodovis Boff, A originalidade historica de Medellín, in <<http://www.servicioskoinonia.org/relat/203p.htm>>, accessed on 02/10/2012.
- 27 See Pope Benedict XVI, May, 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007, at Basilica of Our Lady of Aparecida, Brazil.
- 28 See G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. NY: Orbis, 1971.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 This method had been systematized by the lay movement, Catholic Action (Action Catholique), born in France and very strong in Latin America in the 1950s and the 60s. It helped Christians who engaged socially in search of critical understanding, and commitment through transformative action.
- 31 This theology is inductive, not deductive. Rather than Revelations and ecclesial tradition for theological interpretations applied to life, it departs from realities of poverty and exclusion, and commitment to liberation, to embark on theological reflection and invite transformative action. It brings a critique of modern theology and its pretention to universality, considered Eurocentric and unconnected to the reality of poor and peripheral countries.
- 32 See Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, "A Concise History of Liberation Theology," in <<http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm>> accessed on 10/2/2012.
- 33 See the works of Ambrosius, Chrysostomus, etc.
- 34 The phrase "Church of the Poor" was first used by Pope John XXIII in his inaugural address to the

- Fathers of the Vatican Council in 1962.
- 35 See, for instance, Saint Ambrose: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich." Quoted from : *Populorum Progressio*, "Development of the Peoples" (1967), paragraph 23.
- 36 1983 CIC, canon 222 §2.
- 37 The phrase "Option for the poor" was used by Father Pedro Arrupe, S.J., in 1968, in a letter, "Carta de Rio," addressed to the Jesuits of Latin America.
- 38 For instance, Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*; and John XXIII, in *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*.
- 39 See Agenor Brighenti, op. cit.
- 40 Cf. Matthew 5, Luke 6.
- 41 G. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. New York: Orbis, 1971.
- 42 Clodovis Boff and Jorge Pixley, *Opção pelos pobres*, Petropolis: Vozes, 1986.
- 43 "The glory of God is a human being 'fully alive.'" Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus Haeresis*, Book IV.
- 44 "Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours, but theirs." St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in Lazaro 2, 5: PG 48, 992.
- 45 "The rich man who gives to the poor does not bestow alms, but pays a debt." St. Ambrose of Milan, quoted from <<http://saintquotes.blogspot.com.br/2009/05/suffering-helping-others-who-suffer.html>> accessed on 04/03/2013.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith" in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, edited by Rosino Gibellini, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.
- 48 These are the Greek words used in the New Testament to describe the first Christian community: *didaké*, Doctrine of the Apostles; *koinonia*, fraternal communion; *eucharistia*, thanksgiving and breaking of the bread; and *proseuchai*, communal prayer. See Acts of the Apostles 2:42-46.
- 49 See, for instance, this statement by Dorothy Day: "The greatest challenge today is how to make happen the revolution of the heart, a revolution that has to begin with each one of us." Quoted from <<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/>> accessed on 04/03/2013.
- 50 Per the personalist theory that inspired the heart and mind of Peter Maurin. Personalism is a philosophical school of thought, developed principally by French thinker Emmanuel Mounier, under whom Maurin was a disciple. This philosophy seeks to describe the uniqueness of a human person in the world of nature, specifically in relation to animals, an essential point of interest in human subjectivity or self-consciousness experienced in a person's own acts and inner impressions.
- 51 The political systems that were supported by Liberation Theology were the Nicaraguan Sandinismo and Cuban Revolution. About Cuba, see the book of Frei Betto, *Fidel e a religião*, São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1985.
- 52 See the two instructions written by the Vatican about Liberation Theology during John Paul II's pontificate: *Libertatis conscientia* and *Libertatis Nuntius*, written by John Paul II, the first (LN) in 1984, the other in 1986. See <<http://www.vatican.va/>>.
- 53 I refer, for instance, to the polemical process of silencing and punishment, of Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff: in regard to the censorship of the collection of books "Liberación y Teología" (originally published in Spanish, in 1985, it also appeared in Portuguese "Libertação e Teologia" and in English, published by Orbis).
- 54 See both instructions of the Vatican about this problem, according to note lviii supra: *Libertatis Nuntius* (1984), and *Libertatis Conscientia* (1986); see <<http://www.vatican.va>> (note 51 supra).
- 55 By Orbis Books, NY.
- 56 For instance, the more than abundant production of Leonardo Boff in recent years about issues on Ecology and care for the Earth. See L. Boff, *Ecologia, Mundialização, Espiritualidade*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2008.; or *Ética da vida*. Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2005, among others.
- 57 Cf. Genesis 1:28.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 See concerns about gender in, for example, the works of Elsa Tamez, and Ivone Gebara. On race and ethnicity, the Atabaque groups in Brazil, and Black Theology in the United States have important collective productions. Inter-religious dialogue is

perhaps the most fertile of topics pursued today in Latin America, the subject of innumerable theses and other academic works. See, among others, the works of Marcelo Barros, and Faustino Teixeira.

- 60 Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Mirar Lejos", in *Teología de la liberación: perspectivas*, Lima: CEP, 1988.
- 61 Her own autobiography, and the works of her biographers: *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, NY: Image Books, 1959; W. Miller, *Dorothy Day: a Biography*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982; and Jim Forrest, *Love is the Measure. A Biography of Dorothy Day*, NY: Orbis, 1994.
- 62 We could see in her the incarnation of a rule by St. Ignatius, on the Spiritual Exercises about feeling with the Church: "The Thirteenth Rule: To keep ourselves right in all things, we ought to hold fast to this principle: What I see as white, I will believe to be black if the hierarchical Church thus determines it. For we believe that between Christ our Lord, the Bridegroom, and the Church, his Spouse, there is the one same Spirit who governs and guides us for the salvation of our souls. For it is by the same Spirit and Lord of ours who gave the ten commandments that our holy Mother Church is guided and governed." Cf. Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola (352).
- 63 See, for instance, extracts from Dorothy Day's diary published at the Catholic Worker and reproduced in <<http://www.Catholicworker.org/dorothyday/>>,

where she mentions her admiration for the nonviolent struggle of César Chávez. She composed a prayer to Pope John XXIII to support the peasant leader in his struggles: "I must mention a prayer I wrote in the front of my New Testament, and hope our readers, say this for the strikers: Dear Pope John—please, yourself a *campesino*, watch over the United Farm Workers. Raise up more and more leader-servants throughout the country to stand with César Chávez in this nonviolent struggle with Mammon, in all the rural districts of North, and South, in the cotton fields, beet fields, potato fields, in our orchards and vineyards, our orange groves—wherever men, women and children work on the land. Help make a new order wherein justice flourishes, and, as Peter Maurin, himself a peasant, said so simply, 'Where it is easier to be good.' Please help, Pope John, these rural workers to repossess the land in co-ops, land trusts, with credit unions, clinics—a proliferation of 'the little way' of St. Therese. Help us, Pope John. Amen."

- 64 Robert Ellsberg (ed.) *Dorothy Day. Selected Writings*, NY: Orbis, 1993, p. 190.
- 65 Preface by Dorothy Day to the book of J.A. García (ed.) and C.R. Calle, *Camilo Torres, his Life and his Message*, Springfield: Templegate, 1968, p. 36.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Cf. <<http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives>>.



Father Arthur Poulin, *Eternita*, acrylic on canvas, 12" x 48", 2011